

JAMES H. DOUGLAS
GOVERNOR



State of Vermont

OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR

2006 State of the State Address

MAKING VERMONT AFFORDABLE FOR VERMONTERS

The Governor's Affordability Agenda

Mr. President, Madame Speaker, Members of the General Assembly, distinguished guests, fellow Vermonters:

Each time I rise to address this General Assembly, I stand humbled before you, before Vermont, before God. Vermonters have entrusted in us the privilege to serve them and, in their service, we have come to defend fairness, promote justice, and fight for progress.

We are drawn to this service in singular purpose: to give those without a place, a seat; to give those without a say, a voice; and to give those without a hope, a dream. We fight for Vermonters who live the old ways of having just enough, who ask for little, but who quietly struggle for a better tomorrow. The winters have not tempered their spirit – but forged within the mountainside of their souls the determination to push on.

It is within this spirit we draw our strength, our desire for relentless innovation, to replace the unacceptable, improve the inadequate, and better our best.

As Vermonters, we are proud of our great state: more Vermonters are working today than ever before and we have among the nation's lowest unemployment rates; our state has one of the greenest energy supplies in the country and our supply of renewable power is growing; Vermont was the first state to receive a "global commitment" waiver from the federal government to help save our Medicaid program; Vermont is one of the healthiest states in the union; we have one of the nation's lowest poverty rates; and, of course, our natural environment is unparalleled in its unspoiled beauty.

We have every reason to be proud of our state, but I know that Vermont can and must do even better. We must especially do better to make Vermont an affordable place to live, work and raise a family. We must recognize the burden imposed on Vermonters who are doing all they can just to get by as the state continues to ask of them more and more. We will strive to do better for them, and for their children and grandchildren, so that every generation might enjoy a lifetime of opportunity in our green hills.

The work we have undertaken these past three years has made Vermont a stronger, better state, and it is with an eye toward the future that I ask you to join me in the year to come to make it stronger still.

It is perhaps the men and women of the Vermont National Guard who today best illustrate the strength and resilience of Vermont. We've been fortunate in the last few weeks to welcome home hundreds of our loved ones, our friends and our neighbors who have returned from their deployments—but there are still many for whom we pray, including a member of this General Assembly, Representative Doran Metzger.

We support our troops unconditionally; their personal courage and conviction inspire every Vermonter and strengthen our call to serve the greater good.

With us today, representing all of the members of our armed forces as well as the state's veterans, and reminding us of the tremendous spirit, determination, and endurance of Vermont and its values, are members of the Vermont National Guard. Please join me in thanking them.

While the state of the state is strong, there is also unfinished business that requires our attention. We all agree that more can and should be done to improve access to health insurance. However, an equally pressing challenge is making health insurance more affordable for those who already have it.

The end of last session set in motion productive discussions around Vermont that allowed us to identify responsible, common sense reforms on which we all can agree. This year, I present these changes as part of a consensus reform package to be considered at the beginning of this session. I am grateful that this work has already begun in the Senate and I ask both chambers to pass this package and deliver it for my signature by the end of February.

We also need to work together to address the federal Medicare implementation challenges that are currently afflicting the entire nation. We must ensure that Vermont seniors have access to the prescription drugs they need at the price they were promised.

Earlier today, I directed the Agency of Human Services to immediately reinstate benefits to seniors who were previously enrolled in one of Vermont's prescription drug programs. This means that no senior who relied on state government for medicine will be turned away from a pharmacy. They will get the drugs they need and Vermont will continue to guarantee their affordability.

In addition, we will continue to press the federal government to quickly address these implementation challenges so seniors can take advantage of the federal prescription drug benefit program they were promised.

It is well documented that on the broader question of how best to extend health care coverage to all Vermonters and reduce insurance premiums there are a variety of opinions. Yesterday, the House dealt with the final vestiges of last year's health care debate. My hope is now that it is done, we can focus on the future, and what we can do together to provide real relief to Vermonters.

Two weeks ago, I presented a plan that will reduce health insurance costs, extend access to every resident, and offer Vermonters the same lower cost health insurance options available to consumers in other states. My plan increases Medicaid reimbursements to doctors to help reduce the need to shift costs onto the privately insured, and it does not require the government to make important medical decisions best left in the hands of doctors and patients. We can do this while staying within our means and without raising taxes.

In my plan, there is a role for government, but it is a role that complements rather than crowds out personalized care. It strengthens the safety net for the most vulnerable, without sacrificing the many benefits of a system that currently provides the highest quality health care in the world.

I hope to use the coming weeks to convince you that my plan for comprehensive health care reform is both bold and balanced, far-reaching and far-sighted.

And we must take a far-sighted approach. For two decades Vermont has pursued a course of greater government regulation of the health care system. Hindsight now allows us to assess the costs and benefits of such an approach.

The benefits are meaningful. Virtually every child has health insurance; our immunization rate is second highest in the nation; Vermont is consistently ranked near the top for prenatal care; we have one of the nation's lowest infant mortality rates; and we have taken important steps to provide mental health coverage to vulnerable Vermonters.

These policies have also had many unfortunate consequences, and after twenty years of gradually pursuing this approach, insurance premiums are higher than ever, the number of uninsured Vermonters is increasing and the government programs we already have are headed for bankruptcy. Even with Global Commitment, which allows us more time and flexibility to address the Medicaid cost crisis, the program is still headed for a five-year, \$280 million deficit.

Currently, the program covers one in four Vermonters – the highest rate in the nation and nearly twice the national average. Managing the financial burden of Medicaid alone has proven a nearly impossible task requiring the state to take extraordinary steps, yet this crisis is still far from resolution. The notion of the state taking responsibility for

managing the care of the other three-quarters of the population, as well-meaning as it may be, would result in dire consequences for Vermont's fiscal and economic health –not to mention the inevitable decline in health care quality that would occur once limited government budgets meet with unlimited consumer demands.

My health care reform plan accomplishes our shared goals without compromising quality care, and without biting off more than the taxpayer can chew. I ask the General Assembly to give my plan full consideration and a fair vote. Together, we can have real health care reform this year.

But health insurance is just one of the necessities of modern life where costs are quickly escalating beyond the average Vermont family's ability to afford them.

For many years, I have expressed a deep concern that Vermont is exporting too many of our youth. High taxes, a shortage of affordable homes, high energy costs, soaring school budgets and college tuitions, and a challenging economic environment all conspire to drive our young people to seek a more affordable life elsewhere, and prevent working-class Vermonters from getting ahead.

The stories are familiar:

Young people with college degrees forced to live with their parents for years after graduation because excessive college loans and high housing costs deny them the independence they had every right to expect by their early 20s.

The newlyweds who, despite two incomes, are confined to living in a small apartment – or even with their in-laws – because there are no starter homes available at a reasonable cost. Years once spent building a nest egg for the future are instead spent subsidizing someone else's dream.

Grandparents who move out of state not just seeking warmer weather, but because they can't survive in Vermont on a fixed income when the cost of living escalates.

And perhaps the most familiar experience: parents who watch their children leave Vermont for college never to return permanently because the high cost of doing business in our state hinders the creation of the kinds of 21st century jobs they seek.

There is an increasing crisis of affordability and the signals are all around us – chiefly, the exodus of young people and new families, and the rapid graying of Vermont.

Vermont has the 6th highest cost of living in the nation, despite no major metropolitan areas. Already, the flight of young people as a result of high expense and limited opportunities has helped make Vermont the second-oldest state in the country.

Within twenty-five years the number of retirees will double while the number of working-age Vermonters will continue to shrink. In just the next decade there will be fifteen percent fewer Vermonters under the age of twenty than there were just five years ago.

For all the quality of life we enjoy, a lifetime in Vermont is becoming financially out of reach for middle and low-income residents, many of whom are native Vermonters whose families go back generations. The long-term cultural and economic consequences of this trend are significant and the threat to that famed quality of life is all too real.

I ask that as you consider legislation this session and in following sessions, put foremost in your thoughts the effects that legislation will have on the cost of living and doing business in Vermont. And I ask you to take substantive steps to bring some of the worst cost culprits under control.

We must take action now to adopt an agenda of affordability for Vermont's families. We need to begin today to remedy the high cost of health insurance; to address surging property taxes and housing costs that are squeezing working Vermonters; to help employers create more good-paying jobs; and to put a college education within reach of every Vermonter.

We must begin by recognizing that excessive taxation threatens our prosperity, reduces opportunity, and is an unjust burden on families. When government is consuming too much of its citizens' hard-earned dollars, it undermines and interferes with an individual's ability to prosper and discourages innovation and investments in job creation by employers.

Calvin Coolidge expressed well the philosophy that once defined his home state when he said, "I want the people of America to be able to work less for the government and more for themselves. I want them to have the rewards of their own industry. That is the chief meaning of freedom."

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But too often, the sage advice of our native son has not been observed, and today Coolidge's Vermont has the nation's third highest tax burden as a percent of personal income. This is one area where Vermont should not be proud to be a national leader.

If we are to make Vermont a more affordable state, the problem of over-taxation cannot be ignored and must not be exacerbated. Not too many years ago, we heard the impassioned promises that Act 60 would reduce property taxes. The forecasts portrayed a future of responsible and moderate growth, of sustainable spending spread equitably across all Vermont towns.

Tomorrow is now today and the reality is that education spending has grown at almost twice the rate of inflation, outstripped increases in the gross state product and far

outpaced growth in the family checkbook. The average increase has been over 6% per year – nearly 60% overall growth since 1999.

Property tax burdens have multiplied to keep up with spending. Since 1999, property taxes have risen, on average, at a rate of almost 8% per year. Put another way, taxpayers will pay \$407 million more in property taxes in 2007 than they paid in 1999 – a spike of nearly 82% in eight years. Even with the help of Act 68, if left unabated, the average tax bill will jump over 10% from just this year to next.

However, over the same period, enrollment in our schools has dropped 8%. We'll have over 8000 fewer students in September 2006 than we had in September 1999.

When enrollment is dropping, but spending is rising and taxes are soaring, we have a problem that requires immediate action.

If we expect to keep Vermont affordable for Vermonters, we must act now to dramatically curb the unsustainable growth in property taxes. Today I am offering a comprehensive property tax relief plan for Vermont families to return sustainability to school spending, and give real power back to the local voters and school boards.

I am a firm believer in local control – but since Act 60 undermined that control, property taxes have spun out of control.

Some have offered a proposal to increase the state income tax to pay for education. Vermonters already pay some of the highest income taxes in the nation. Piling an education income tax on top of an already high income tax simply will not do for Vermont taxpayers. Moreover, raising the income tax does nothing to address the issue of higher spending.

As a matter of principle, taxes should not grow faster than your paycheck. So, I propose capping education property tax growth at no more than the rate of inflation each year. At roughly 3.5%, this target is sustainable and allows room for school budgets to grow responsibly to meet the needs of a community. If a town would like to spend more than the rate of inflation, my proposal will require a supermajority of 60% of the voters to pass the increase.

In addition, I propose a package of changes to restructure the income sensitivity program, including a measure to close loopholes in the prebate / rebate system – loopholes that allow owners of million-dollar homes to get five-figure prebate checks.

Combined with the return of the property tax surplus in the education fund, we will cut the statewide property tax rate by \$.04 for all taxpayers. Further, with my relief plan, we can cut statewide rates by at least another \$.10 in 2008 – that is almost \$65 million in taxpayer savings in two years.

Act 60 eliminated the machinery and equipment property tax – giving businesses a property tax reduction on their fixed assets. However, because the key fixed asset of farmers is their land, our farmers could not enjoy this tax reduction. It is time to correct this double standard and repeal the education property tax on working farms by 2008.

This will save the average Vermont farmer more than \$3,500 per year which can be put to good use maintaining farm equipment, barns and other facilities, as well as strengthening our agricultural community which is so important to us all.

Last year, this General Assembly added a provision into the final budget bill that I fear will lead to an unacceptable outcome: adding two more pre-kindergarten grades to the already stressed K-12 education system and putting taxpayers on the hook to fund it. Instead of this approach, we need to find ways to assist our private pre-school providers. Through Building Bright Futures, we must ensure that all our pre-schools are of high quality and that our children are safe. I am asking the General Assembly to reconsider the decision to further increase the cost of education and the growing tax bills that accompany those costs.

These measures to stem skyrocketing property taxes will keep more hard-earned money in the pockets of Vermonters – where it belongs.

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Another factor driving the high cost of living in Vermont is housing. We must do more to ensure that every Vermonter has the ability to realize the American Dream.

Over the past five years, while the average household income has risen a respectable 3.7%, the median cost of a home surged 10% per year – almost triple the rate of income growth. Because of the growing disparity between housing prices and household income, the average Vermont homebuyer has substantially less purchasing power for housing than was the case just five years ago. Unless we address this problem now, the dream of owning a home in our state for the average Vermonter could slip away within a generation.

I want to work with this General Assembly – and with Vermont's strong network of housing providers – to address our shortage of low and middle-income housing. I believe that there are steps that we can take this year to move us forward, so let us pledge to work together and make affordable homes a long-term priority.

In addressing our housing needs, we must also recognize that Vermonters prize and cherish our historic downtowns and village centers, the traditional New England settlement patterns that make our communities such wonderful and unique places to live. I will propose to this legislature that we strengthen those communities – and establish an environment conducive to the creation of more homes and mixed-use development – with a new state designation called Opportunity Zones. Opportunity Zones will encourage

municipalities to plan for their future needs, and will stimulate smart growth by streamlining permitting in those zones.

Our downtowns and our village centers are key to this state's continued economic growth and integral to our quality of life; we must do everything we can to help them prosper.

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Not long ago I visited Vermont Precision Tools, a longtime manufacturer in Swanton. The company was founded in 1968 by Norm Leduc and Ray Boutin. The company manufactures precision tooling for a variety of sectors, including the industrial, automotive and medical industries. One of its products is this medical "burr" – a tiny surgical tool used for bone reconstruction in operating rooms worldwide.

In 2003, Vermont Precision Tools moved into a new, state-of-the art manufacturing facility in Swanton – staying close to their workforce and their roots. Over the last two years, the company has created twenty new jobs and it shows no signs of slowing.

Because of its continuing innovation, its unwavering commitment to quality and the hard work of its skilled employees, Vermont Precision Tools has made its mark on this emerging global industry and its products are sold around the world.

The story of Vermont Precision Tools is a great Vermont story.

It reminds us that the global economy is a reality that must be made into an opportunity; that we are not only competing with our neighbors, but with competitors half way around the globe; and it draws attention to the importance of higher education, workforce training and the role of science and technology in the 21st Century economy.

With the right combination of reforms and an intense focus on our future, we can build on the successes of the last three years and replicate this model anywhere in Vermont. That is why I am calling on this Legislature to join me in making Vermont a true leader in our national and global economy.

We must begin by creating a competitive advantage around vigorous and innovative economic sectors providing good-paying career opportunities in Vermont. This will encourage young Vermonters to stay and make a living here, and it will attract new talented individuals and employers to move to Vermont.

Ongoing global and national trends require that this economy – Vermont's new economy – be knowledge-based, and built around our history, culture, values and resources. It must be intertwined with our state's higher education enterprises and workforce development efforts, efforts that should be strengthened and expanded to ensure that all Vermonters have the tools they need to thrive in the economy of tomorrow. And it must recognize that the real engines of our economy are the small businesses and manufacturing companies that employ sixty-eight percent of all Vermonters.

Without this long-term vision – without this plan to recast the economic landscape and make Vermont affordable for Vermonters – our short-term successes will be fleeting.

That is why today I present to you a plan to build generations of opportunity.

To create the next generation of jobs in Vermont, we must capitalize on our commitment to the natural environment. Protecting our land, air and water is not a partisan issue – it is a value that all Vermonters share. Vermont must leverage its incomparable commitment to the environment to become the Silicon Valley for environmental industries, or as Lieutenant Governor Dubie envisions, the *Green Valley*.

Vermont must become the international leader for marketable environmental products and the center of a global bazaar of environmental ideas. Vermont can become a leader in research and design, next generation manufacturing and export of environmentally related products.

This environmental focus will provide new opportunities at every level of the economy all across our state. Vermont businesses will need well-trained engineers and highly-skilled workers from Newport to Barre to Bennington to design and build these innovative products. As the companies prosper, the communities will flourish, and soon employees will need new homes, new cars and new services.

The Green Valley will need a sturdy infrastructure on which businesses can thrive. Good roads, strong bridges, and a telecommunications network that supports widespread cell phone coverage and broadband access are essential tools for any 21st century entrepreneur. To meet our ambitious telecommunications goals we will work proactively in partnership with private providers to expand capacity across the state.

A central issue in the affordability of Vermont is the need for economical and reliable sources of energy. The costs of heating your home or business and fueling your car or truck have risen dramatically in the last year. This year, the state has taken extraordinary measures to ensure home heating assistance for the most vulnerable over the winter. We must also aggressively safeguard consumers from price gouging and rate spikes that unfairly overcharge Vermonters.

Maintaining an affordable power supply requires a long-term strategic vision. Where we can, we must employ renewable energy sources and reduce demand by conserving more and promoting efficiency. The State has taken the lead on this by revamping our fleet system and instituting a plan to make state buildings environmentally friendly, and I have appointed a blue ribbon commission to recommend how we can extend these initiatives to the private sector.

But for consumers such as manufacturers, whose machines demand power to turn out their products, we must ensure competitively priced energy to help them keep and create good-paying jobs. In the coming years we will foster an affordable energy supply, rich in renewables, from both in-state sources and our neighbors in Canada. The need for reliable and reasonably priced power is fundamental for both employers and employees.

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As we expand the need for a well-trained workforce, the nexus with higher education is critical. That's why I am proposing more substantial and direct investments in the University of Vermont, the Vermont State Colleges and the Vermont Student Assistance Corporation to fund innovative research, programs and equipment to support the sustainable technology sector.

Due to the advocacy of Senator Jeffords through the federal transportation bill, the University of Vermont has become one of the nation's ten National Transportation Research Centers, a designation that distinguishes UVM as a national leader in research and development and the center for an important new high tech and environmentally sustainable business cluster.

The Green Valley offers a quality place for workers to live, a strong environmental culture, and a great place to work, contribute to society, and raise their families. But the Green Valley will only succeed in attracting innovative 21st century businesses if we address the affordability of living and doing business in Vermont, including the cost of higher education.

Vermont has more colleges per capita than any other state. Still, sadly, Vermont leads the nation in the percentage of high school graduates who leave their state to go to college—and who, for the most part, will not make Vermont their home again in the course of their working lives.

And while we spend more per pupil on primary and secondary education than nearly any other state, our support of higher education is among the weakest.

The cornerstone of my effort to make college more affordable and keep Vermont's young people here is the Vermont Promise Scholarship program, a 15-year, nearly \$175 million initiative.

The Vermont Promise Scholarship program will provide high school graduates more than 1,000 awards per year – over 12,000 scholarships during the life of the program – to attend one of the state's many outstanding institutions of higher education.

In return for the Vermont Promise Scholarship, we ask the graduates to start a life here in Vermont once they complete their studies. If they do, the state will forgive the full

award; if they choose to chart their course elsewhere, the state will treat a portion of the scholarship as a loan.

This investment in scholarships for young Vermonters is made possible by using additional funds that will come to the state beginning in 2008 through the tobacco settlement agreement reached seven years ago. Vermont will receive one of the largest shares per capita because of our successful and aggressive stance against tobacco through litigation and legislation. As a result of our hard work to fight smoking, Vermont will be able to continue our cessation programs *and* fund our Vermont Promise Scholarship program.

By investing now in this generation of Vermonters, we are investing in our future leaders and problem solvers, and the source of our economic and cultural success in the years ahead. We are giving them important incentives to stay in Vermont to help us all build a better, brighter tomorrow. It is our promise to the next generation.

As we strive to bring generations of opportunity to all Vermonters, we must also keep our promise to ensure the safety of our communities; we cannot forget the most vulnerable Vermonters who depend on us for protection.

Last year, I asked the General Assembly to pass my multi-part “Safe Communities” legislation that would give parents and law enforcement officials new tools to keep Vermont families secure in their own neighborhoods.

Vermont is fortunate to be among the safest states in the nation. But today, there is a tiny population of hard-core criminals in our prison system who have not received treatment that might allow them to return to society and lead productive and nonviolent lives. These criminals are the worst of the worst: repeat rapists, child molesters, and murderers who, left untreated, represent a very high likelihood to reoffend once released.

Last month, I received a letter from a group of Winooski High School students who expressed their deep concerns about the recent release into their community of one such criminal with a long history of convictions for child molestation.

The letter read, in part: “We do not understand why someone with such a risk of assaulting young children, who refuses to have any psychiatric help, is being released into our community.”

Frankly, I do not understand either. For the sake of our children and families, we must ensure that these extreme sexual and violent predators successfully complete treatment that will help prevent another victim before they are released into our neighborhoods among our children.

My civil confinement proposal should not be and does not need to be a partisan issue. Indeed, just across the lake in New York, leaders of the rival political parties have joined in support of a civil confinement proposal. I welcome and encourage bipartisan support for my Safe Communities legislation as well.

I do not want to come back next session with Vermont's children and parents still wondering why we have not acted. Today, once again, I ask this General Assembly to join me in support of this important change to keep untreated violent and sex offenders off our streets, out of our neighborhoods, far from our schools and away from our children.

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To translate opportunity into achievement it must be joined with the hope for a better life. We must keep families and communities active and involved in bringing up young Vermonters so they might avoid the pitfalls that lead to a life of crime or perpetuate the cycle of dependence. I want every child to have a healthy relationship with a supportive adult, to feel valued at home and in his or her community and to contribute to our state's future.

Helping kids stay drug-free is the first step. While we've made progress in recent years in drug enforcement, education and treatment, we must continue to expand our efforts to combat substance abuse in Vermont.

Mentoring is another way to help teach our children Vermont values. I am proposing a strategic initiative called "Vermont Mentors!" to significantly expand mentoring throughout our state.

And for Vermont's foster children, those kids transitioning from the care of the state to adulthood, we must pledge the support, the tools and the guidance they need to achieve their dreams. The state must be by their side, not in their way, as they cut their own path toward independence.

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Late last summer, we saw the strength and spirit of the Vermont community in full bloom. Just days after our nation's worst natural disaster, Vermonters were quick to respond, and this small and mighty state was among the very first to reach out to our fellow Americans and deliver lifesaving supplies.

The aid came in many forms.

As Dorothy and I visited collection sites around the state, the tremendous outpouring by so many Vermonters touched us deeply. We met a woman in Montpelier who, while volunteering on the State House lawn, had her shoes packed up by accident and loaded

into a truck. Her response was simply, “There’s someone in Mississippi who needs those shoes more than I do.”

Together, in an overwhelming showing of generosity and selflessness, Vermonters worked to donate, package, load and deliver sixty-five tractor-trailer trucks jammed with supplies – more than four million pounds of material to the devastated Gulf Coast.

Among the truckers and troopers who transported the goods was Buck Adams, an independent hauler out of Bellows Falls. Buck, an excavator by trade, was quick to call and give his time to make the run south. He traveled to Mississippi in his own cramped short-haul tractor, forfeiting a week’s wages to make the round trip. Despite these difficulties, Buck was ready to volunteer for a second assignment.

In addition to relief convoys, Vermont coordinated state assets such as National Guard resources, public health officers, medical personnel, and hazardous material teams that were deployed to the affected region. In this group were thirteen local rescue departments who answered the call for ambulances following Hurricane Rita. The volunteer drivers convoyed south and spent thirty days helping sort through the aftermath in Houston. Another group – Vermont firefighters – traveled to the Gulf Coast to offer community counseling and outreach for the neediest victims.

There were countless other individual efforts that didn’t make the front page of the papers, just anonymous generosity to people in desperate need.

One story I heard was about a sixth grader named Erin Reiner from St. Johnsbury. Erin’s pastor gave her some seed money and told her to put it to good use for others. Erin took it upon herself to sew 200 scarves by hand. She sold each and every scarf for \$5 and donated all the money – \$1000 – to the American Red Cross Hurricane Relief fund. A remarkable effort.

Vermont’s generosity for the hurricane victims didn’t require government; government simply provided the vehicle and Vermonters did all the rest. This is the true spirit of Vermont community – always ready to come together across any boundary to help a neighbor in need.

Both Buck and Erin embody Vermont community, ingenuity, sacrifice and service. They join us in the balcony today and I want to thank them – and I want to thank every Vermonter who donated time, money, food or clothes – for their service to our fellow Americans. You make Vermont very proud.

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Today, I have asked for your cooperation addressing some of Vermont’s greatest challenges.

Let us carry forward the strength of our forbears and the spirit of our community to push beyond the everyday boundaries that too often preclude progress.

Let us advance an agenda of affordability for all Vermonters so that this generation and all those that follow may enjoy the blessings of our magnificent state and the promise of Vermont.

Let us strengthen our communities and keep them safe for the young and the young at heart.

And let us harness the value and the momentum of every success and move forward to a truly prosperous Vermont.

As I look ahead, I'm increasingly optimistic. My vision for Vermont remains, at its core, one of hope and opportunity. I envision a state, as all of you do, where the opportunity to prosper is universally accessible and where this prosperity grows stronger with each generation.

Thank you, and may God bless America and our great state of Vermont.

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